



A Brief and Candid Answer to [...] “The Selling of Joseph”
John Saffin (1701)

*In 1700, a white Puritan and judge in Massachusetts named Samuel Sewall published an anti-slavery pamphlet titled *The Selling of Joseph*, one of the first anti-slavery publications in American history. The following year, another Massachusetts judge, John Saffin, also white and Puritan, published a pro-slavery rebuttal to Sewall’s anti-slavery pamphlet. Excerpts from Saffin’s pro-slavery pamphlet are presented below.*

The dispute between Saffin and Sewall was personal: Saffin was incensed that Sewall was helping a black slave of Saffin’s, named Adam, use the courts to compel Saffin to free him in compliance with a promise Saffin had made to Adam but then reneged on. Publishing an attack on Sewall’s anti-slavery pamphlet was a way for Saffin to strike back at Sewall, as well as an opportunity for Saffin to publicly defend his own conduct toward Adam. The courts finally freed Adam despite Saffin’s protracted, and even corrupt, efforts to prevent it. However, the institution of slavery persisted in Massachusetts until the 1780s.

That honorable and learned gentleman, the author of a sheet entitled *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial*, seems from thence to draw this conclusion: that because the sons of Jacob did very ill in selling their brother Joseph to the Ishmaelites, who were heathens, therefore it is utterly unlawful to buy and sell Negroes, though among Christians; which conclusion I presume is not well drawn from the premises, nor is the case parallel. For it was unlawful for the Israelites to sell their brethren upon any account or pretense whatsoever during life; but it was not unlawful for the seed of Abraham to have bondmen and bondwomen, either born in their house or bought with their money, as it is written of Abraham (Gen. 14:14; 21:10) [and] after the giving of the law (Exod. 21:16; Lev. 25:44-46; Josh. 9:23). [...]

[The gentleman] would prove [...] that all men have equal right to liberty and all outward comforts of this life; which position seems to invert the order that God hath set in the world, who hath ordained different degrees and orders of men, some to be high and honorable, some to be low and despicable; some to be monarchs, kings, princes and governors, masters and commanders; others to be subjects and to be commanded; servants of sundry sorts and degrees, bound to obey; yea, some to be born slaves and so to remain during their lives, as hath been proved. Otherwise there would be a mere parity among men, contrary to that of the apostle, 1 Cor. 12:13-26, where he sets forth (by way of comparison) the different sorts and offices of the members of the body, indigitating that they are all of use, but not equal and of like dignity. So God hath set different orders and degrees of men in the world, both in church and commonweal. Now, if this position of parity should be true, it would then follow that the ordinary course of divine providence of God in the world should be wrong and unjust (which we must not dare to think, much less to affirm), and all the sacred rules, precepts, and commands of the Almighty, which he hath given the sons of men to observe and keep in their respective places, orders, and degrees, would be to no purpose [...]

In the next place, this worthy gentleman makes a large discourse [...] respecting white and black servants, which conduceth most to the welfare and benefit of this province; which he concludes to be white men, who are in many respects to be preferred before Blacks. Who doubts that? Doth

it therefore follow that it is altogether unlawful for Christians to buy and keep Negro servants (for this is the thesis), but that those that have them ought in conscience to set them free and so lose all the money they cost [...]? But if he could persuade the General Assembly to make an act that all that have Negroes and so set them free shall be reimbursed out of the public treasury, and that there shall be no more Negroes brought into the country, 'tis probable there would be more of his opinion. Yet he would find it a hard task to bring the country to consent thereto; for then the Negroes must all be sent out of the country, or else the remedy would be worse than the disease; and it is to be feared that those Negroes that are free, if there be not some strict course taken with them by authority, they will be a plague to this country.

Again, if it should be unlawful to deprive them that are lawful captives, or bondmen, of their liberty for life, being heathens; it seems to be more unlawful to deprive our brethren, of our own or other Christian nations, of the liberty (though but for a time) by binding them to serve some seven, ten, fifteen, and some twenty years, which oftentimes proves for their whole life, as many have been; which, in effect, is the same in nature though different in the time. Yet this was allowed among the Jews by the law of God, and is the constant practice of our own and other Christian nations in the world; the which our author, by his dogmatical assertions, doth condemn as irreligious, which is diametrically contrary to the rules and precepts which God hath given the diversity of men to observe in their respective stations, callings, and conditions of life, as hath been observed.

And to illustrate his assertion, our author brings in, by way of comparison, the law of God against man-stealing on pain of death, intimating thereby that buying and selling of Negroes is a breach of that law and so deserves death: a severe sentence. But herein he begs the question with a *caveat emptor*. For in that very chapter, there is a dispensation to the people of Israel to have bondmen, women, and children, even of their own nation in some cases, and rules given therein to be observed concerning them (Exod. 21:4; and in the before cited place, Lev. 25:44-46). Though the Israelites were forbidden (ordinarily) to make bondmen and women of their own nation, but of strangers they might. The words run thus (verse 44): *Both thy bondmen and thy bondmaids which thou shalt have shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall you buy bondmen and bondmaids*, etc. See also 1 Cor. 12:13, *Whether we be bond or free*, which shows that in the times of the New Testament, there were bondmen also, etc. [...]

We grant it for a certain and undeniable verity that all mankind are the sons and daughters of Adam and the creatures of God. But it doth not therefore follow that we are bound to love and respect all men alike; this, under favor, we must take leave to deny. We ought, in charity, if we see our neighbor in want, to relieve them in a regular way, but we are not bound to give them so much of our estates as to make them equal with ourselves because they are our brethren, the sons of Adam [...] We are exhorted *to do good unto all, but especially to them who are of the household of faith* (Gal. 6:10). And we are to love, honor, and respect all men according to the gift of God that is in them: I may love my servant well, but my son better [...] It would be a violation of common prudence, and a breach of good manners, to treat a prince like a peasant. And this worthy gentleman would deem himself much neglected if we should show him no more deference than to an ordinary porter. And therefore these florid expressions, *the sons and daughters of the first Adam, the brethren and sisters of the second Adam, and the offspring of God*, seem to be misapplied to import and insinuate that we ought to tender pagan Negroes with all love, kindness, and equal respect as to the best of men.

By all of which it doth evidently appear, both by scripture and reason, the practice of the people of God in all ages, both before and after the giving of the law and in the times of the gospel, that there were bondmen, women, and children commonly kept by holy and good men and improved in service; and therefore, by the command of God (Lev. 25:44) and their venerable example, we may keep bondmen and use them in our service still; yet with all candor, moderation, and Christian prudence, according to their state and condition, consonant to the word of God.

The Negroes' Character

Cowardly and cruel are those Blacks innate,
 prone to revenge, imp of inveterate hate.
 He that exasperates them, soon espies
 mischief and murder in their very eyes.
 Libidinous, deceitful, false, and rude,
 the spume issue of ingratitude.
 The premises considered, all may tell
 how near good Joseph they are parallel.

Source: *A Brief and Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet, Entituled, "The Selling of Joseph"* (1701), as reproduced in George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 251-256, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/fk3416t678>. Public domain.

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These edited excerpts from Saffin's pamphlet are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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